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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA REACTION TO PRESIDENT'S JANUARY 26 AL-ARABIYA  
INTERVIEW: A DAY LATE AND A DOLLAR SHORT

REF: SECSTATE 07500

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SUMMARY  
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Thursday, January 29, 2009

11. (U) Summary and Comment. As of Thursday, January 29, no Kuwaiti dailies offered commentaries on President Obama's January 26 television interview with Al-Arabiya. The interview was covered in an extremely positive light by the State-run Kuwaiti News Agency (KUNA) on January 27, and picked up by all Kuwaiti English and Arabic dailies on the same day. However, all dailies lacked commentaries on the interview, a reflection which should be attributed to the viewing habits of Kuwaitis as well as the local press, the latter of whom are notoriously lazy about reacting to a breaking story in a timely manner and are mainly driven to cover local news. Alerting the local media to a potential interview 24 hours prior to its taking place would maximize already good coverage, in addition to encouraging commentaries in Kuwaiti print dailies. End Summary and Comment.

12. (U) The positive response to the interview in part reflects the television viewing habits of the Kuwaiti public. It is of note that most Kuwaitis who view Al-Arabiya television are already pro-American and generally supportive of U.S. policy. Kuwaitis harboring anti-American sentiments or who vehemently oppose U.S. policy tend to choose Al-Jazeera as their main source of news, and are not likely to have viewed the interview. This observation is supported by a special report that appeared on January 29 in the liberal Arabic language daily, Al-Rai. In the report, Al-Rai's Washington correspondent, Hussein Abdul Hussein writes (01/29), "According to internal reports from the Inter-Media Organization, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya news satellite stations had the largest viewership in 15 Arab countries. The viewership numbers of Al-Jazeera in one week were estimated to be at 71.5 million. Al-Jazeera maintains its position as the number one news station and source of news, while Al-Arabiya ranked second with 48,300,000 viewers. The same study revealed that Al-Arabiya had particularly fierce competition from Al-Jazeera in four Arab countries -- Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, and Bahrain. However the report indicated that in Iraq and Saudi Arabia Al-Arabiya TV had the highest viewership."

13. (U) In response to REFTEL, Post contacted Managing Editors of both liberal and conservative Kuwaiti print dailies, al-Rai and Al-Watan, respectively. When contacted by telephone, Managing Editor of al-Rai Mr. Ali Ballout opined that the interview (01/29): "was very good and it highlighted the President's vision for the region." In his own words Mr. Ballout added (01/29): "I got the

feeling that President Obama was reaching out to Arab and Muslim nations. It is now time for the recipients of this message to react." In response to Post's query about the lack of commentaries in Thursday's Kuwaiti dailies, he responded that (01/29): "Kuwaiti writers are too busy with local politics; they are not even paying attention to important regional issues at the moment." Mr. Hussam Al-Fat'hy, Managing Editor of the Al-Watan, Kuwait's most widely read newspaper, opined (01/29) that coverage of the interview in Kuwait would have been maximized had the local media been alerted to the interview and its possible discussion points 24 hours prior to its actual occurrence. Mr. Fat'hy also opined that Al-Arabiya was the best medium for the interview, citing Al-Jazeera as the only alternative.

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